

Don Nemechek, Richard Grissom Jr., John Robinson Sr. and BTK.

They are names from the dark side of Kansas history; murderers who targeted multiple victims over a period of time.

Serial killers.

"They are a different breed of animal, I guess you could say," said Larry Thomas, a Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent.

The term "serial killer" was coined in the early 1970s by the FBI to categorize murderers who claim at least three victims over time. Serial killers usually have Jekyll and Hyde personalities, appearing normal and pleasant in everyday life but secretly stalking and killing their victims.

In the case of male serial killers, there often is a deviant or sexual element to the murders, Thomas said. In the case of female, or "black widow" serial killers, the motive is usually to control money or assets, he said.

"It goes back to what makes us different," Thomas said of the genders.

The BTK case

Since the 1970s, the Wichita serial killer known as BTK, for Bind, Torture and Kill, has frightened and fascinated the public, not only in Kansas but across the country. BTK is a suspect in eight unsolved Wichita murders that occurred between 1974 and 1986. The killer sought attention for his grisly work by giving himself a name and sending messages to the police and the media.

After killing his last victim, BTK disappeared. He wasn't heard from again until early 2004 when he again sent messages to the Wichita media, seemingly taunting police as if daring them to find him.

Thomas heads the KBI's cold case unit, which investigates old, unsolved homicides throughout the state. Most recently he has been working with Wichita police in the hunt for BTK.

"I think the case itself is very unique," Thomas said of BTK. "I wouldn't give him the benefit of calling him the state's most notorious serial killer because that's what he wants to hear."

While BTK has garnered considerable attention, he has plenty of company in the state's ranks of serial killers. It all began more than a hundred years ago with a family that operated a small inn near Cherryvale.

'Bloody Benders'

During the 1870s a family of four living in a small house near Cherryvale kept their cellar stashed with bodies awaiting burial in their back yard.

The parents, simply known to the local residents as "Ma" and "Pa" Bender, their son, John, and daughter, Kate, welcomed travelers looking for a meal and a place to spend the night. Kate, who claimed to be a spiritualist, may have played a key role by encouraging men who appeared to have plenty of money to stop over.

During dinner, one of the Bender clan would come up behind the unsuspecting boarders, bash them in the head with a hammer and then slit their throats. The victims were relieved of their money and their bodies shoved through a trap door into the cellar. Historical accounts maintain the Benders killed 11 people.

In 1873, the local populace became suspicious of the Benders and the family disappeared, never to be heard from again. The bodies of their victims were found buried in an orchard behind the house.

Inside the house two bloodstained hammers were found. Those hammers today are on display in the Cherryvale Museum.

Don Nemechek

On Dec. 13, 1974, Francis "Don" Nemechek shot out the tire of a car traveling on Interstate Highway 70 west of Hays. He then abducted the occupants of the car, two women and a 2-year-old boy. He shot and killed the women and left the boy, who wandered away and froze to death.

On June 30, 1976, Nemechek abducted and killed a 20-year-old Hays woman who was riding a bicycle.

On Aug. 21, 1976, Nemechek abducted a 16-year-old rangerette from Cedar Bluff Reservoir in western Kansas and stabbed her to death.

In February 1977, in a trial held in Salina under a judge's change of venue order, a jury found Nemechek guilty of first-degree murder in all five deaths. He was sentenced to five life prison terms. Twice the Kansas Parole Board turned down Nemechek's attempts at parole. Nemechek, who is now held in the Lansing Correctional Facility, will be eligible again in 2007.

Richard Grissom Jr.

In August 1999 a team of scientists, academics and homicide investigators searched a grassy field off of Douglas County Road 458 southeast of Clinton Lake dam. They were looking for the bodies of three women killed by Richard Grissom Jr. They were unsuccessful.

In 1990, even without the bodies, a Johnson County jury found Grissom guilty in the first-degree murder deaths of Joan A. Butler, 24, Overland Park; Theresa Brown, 22, and Christine Rusch, 22, roommates living in a Lenexa apartment.

The women disappeared in the summer of 1989. Grissom, a house painter and maintenance worker, liked to hang out at Lawrence discos. He was found at a Lawrence apartment complex with the car leased by Butler. He ran from a police patrolman trying to question him and then eluded a police search.

Grissom was later tracked to Texas where he was arrested at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Grissom never admitted his guilt and thus hasn't told police where the women's bodies were hidden. Lenexa Police Lt. Pat Hinkle wonders if he ever will.

"He's just your typical con man," Hinkle said. "He won't say anything unless there's something to be gained for him."

Hinkle led the investigation of the Brown and Rusch murders as well as multiple searches of the field near Clinton Lake. The field was searched because a resident in the area recorded a license tag on a vehicle seen there at the time of the murders. It turned out to be a stolen tag later found to be in Grissom's possession.

"He absolutely has no regard for anybody or anybody's rules," said Hinkle, who also has had visits with Grissom in prison.

John E. Robinson Sr.

During the 1990s John Robinson Sr. sought out and targeted lonely, troubled women. He also met some of his female victims through Internet sex and bondage networks. The Johnson County man left bodies in Missouri storage sheds and in barrels on property he owned in Linn County.

Robinson was 59 years old when he was sentenced to death in Kansas for two murders and given a life sentence for a third. The Kansas Supreme Court has since ruled the state's death penalty unconstitutional. In Cass County, Mo., he entered into an unusual plea agreement and admitted that prosecutors had enough evidence to convict him for five murders.

Other killers out there?

There may have been other serial killers who have passed through Kansas undetected, authorities say. There are a few unsolved homicides in Kansas that could be the work of serial killers, Thomas said. Such indications include how the victims were killed or how their bodies were disposed of. One possible victim was found several years ago in Douglas County, Thomas said.

The badly decomposed body of Nilsa Sanchez was found Sept. 1, 1989, in a culvert south of Stull.

"We continually review unsolved murder cases to see if there are any connections to murders in other states," Thomas said.

Nothing was known about serial killers during most of the last two centuries, but that doesn't mean they didn't exist, said Baldwin Police Chief Mike McKenna, who headed a major crime team when he was with the Wichita Police Department. He also was involved in the BTK investigation.

"I think throughout history we've had serial killers," McKenna said. "Either suspects didn't tell the authorities about their victims or the authorities weren't educated enough to recognize them. It is only logical to assume these types of sociopaths have been in our society for as long as we've had civilization."